

## Editorial

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‘Tell all the truth’, says Emily Dickinson, ‘but tell it slant. Success in circuit lies.’ To see the truth – ‘Too bright for our infirm delight’ – would dazzle, even blind us. We must not stare at the sun directly, but look rather at its image, which, while still revelatory, is safer viewing. But what is it to ‘tell it slant’ in philosophy of religion, and is it desirable to do so?

It might seem obvious what telling it *straight* amounts to in this area: without resorting to metaphor or figurative language, we state our theses plainly and our premises and background assumptions explicitly, avoid contradiction, acknowledge previous discussions, and when we employ examples we pare them to the minimum, leaving out unnecessary and distracting detail. In our writing, let our model be the scientific report, for what are we, if not conceptual scientists? Telling it slant, in contrast, would depart from this model of transparency, and the effect can only be to obscure, confuse, and distort. As for avoiding the dazzle of unvarnished truth, isn’t it philosophy’s job to allow us to step outside Plato’s cave of shadows? And if we have taken our time about it, so much the better: the truth will ‘dazzle gradually’, as Dickinson recommends it should.

That little sketch of a much-exemplified approach to philosophy of religion (particularly of the analytic variety) might have appeared to veer ever so slightly into parody, with its mention of ‘conceptual scientists’. Unfairly so, perhaps, for who could reasonably object to the attempt at clarity? However, treating philosophy of religion as a kind of abstract science is not ideologically neutral. When, in *Literature and Dogma*, Matthew Arnold contrasted the scientific approach to religious discourse (that is, to focus on doctrine, its implications, and its metaphysical basis) with the literary approach (to be responsive to the feelings and ethical vision expressed), he was well aware of the alienating tendencies of the former. That does not necessarily make it a mistaken approach – though that was his argument – but it may be a rather partial one. If our subject is philosophy of mathematics, we unhesitatingly adopt it, and in so doing mirror mathematical practice. But when it comes to religion, in all its profusion of imagery, emotive language, and particularity, isn’t there a risk that the attempt at abstract systematization will end up telling it not straight, but slant?

What is the alternative, however? To celebrate obscurity and inconsistency? That hardly has much to recommend it. But, to follow Arnold’s recommendation,

we might find it beneficial, sometimes, to adopt a more narrative approach, one that engages concrete human situations at a level of particular detail which, rather than being simply distracting, succeeds in illuminating religious life and thought. That is not to abandon clarity and transparency, but the result will be a more literary essay than the quasi-scientific report that, through the increasing professionalization of the subject, and the demand for accountability to funding bodies, has come to dominate academic writing in the area. Isn't there a danger, though, that the narrative approach will be just that – narrative, rather than philosophy? Not if it is appropriately critical, argumentatively structured, and sensitive to the wider consequences.

Which of these contrasting approaches counts as telling it straight or slant where religious truth is concerned depends on our ideological perspective. What therefore seems desirable for a journal such as this is a plurality of approaches and styles. Nothing illustrates this better than the variety of volumes that appear in the Book Review section of each issue. Books in the central analytic tradition are of course well represented, but books in other traditions and literary styles – even, on occasion, biography – also feature. For this admirably inclusive policy, we have to thank Christopher Hamilton, who for ten years between 2004 and 2013 occupied, with distinction, the post of Book Reviews Editor. I would like to record here my grateful thanks to him as he steps down for the imaginative and conscientious way he has fulfilled this role over that time, and to welcome his successor, and colleague at King's, Clare Carlisle.

As readers will have noted from the front cover, *Religious Studies* has now reached its fiftieth volume. And later this year we will anticipate the journal's fiftieth anniversary with a conference in Leeds, which will take not only a backwards glance, but also a glimpse at possible future directions of the discipline. I hope many of you will join our distinguished speakers in celebrating fifty years of telling it both straight and slant.